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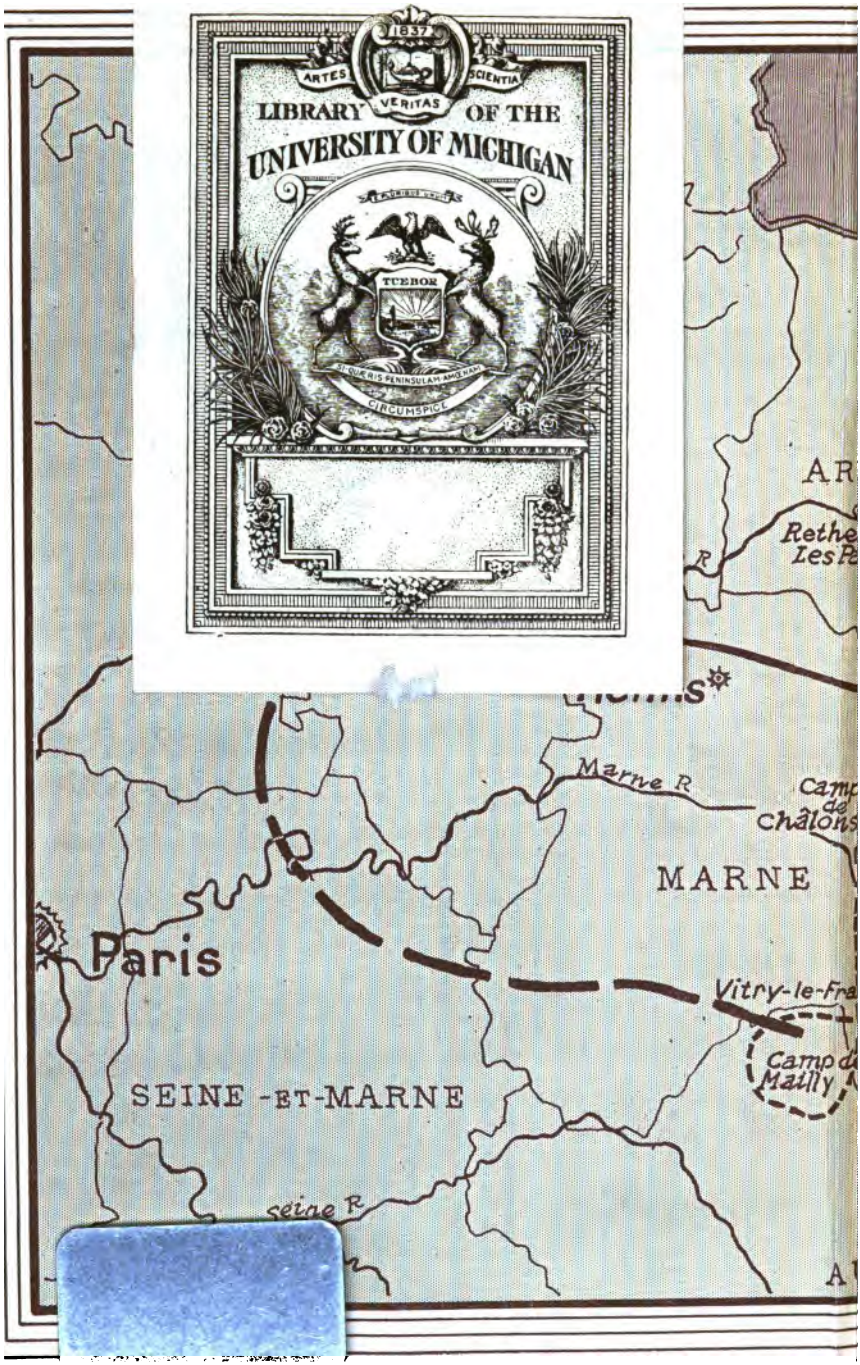
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WAR THE CREATOR

WAR~THE CREATOR

BY~GELETT BURGESS~~~

New York B. W. HUEBSCH 1916

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WAR THE CREATOR

I

BECAUSE he was my friend, because he was so lovable, because he suffered much, I want to try to tell the story of a boy who, in two months, became a man. My hero is Georges Cucurou, the son of a shoemaker of Toulouse. I happened to see him first just before the war began, and not again until after he had been wounded; and the change in him was then so great that I could not rest until I had learned how it had been brought about. Georges is but one of the thousands who have gone into that furnace of patriotism; in France such experiences as his are commonplace now, but when I heard

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his story I got a glimpse of war in a new aspect. Before, I had thought of it only as stupid, destructive, dire; now, in his illumined face, I saw the work of War the Creator.

His narrative is concerned with only the first six weeks of the fighting, and mostly with that terrible retreat from Belgium, so bitter in its disappointments, so trying to the flamboyant courage of the French. Hardly had they rallied along the Marne and begun to pursue the enemy when Georges was wounded and invalided home. It was there in the hospital that I got his history; and from those talks, and his notebook, and his letters to his aunt, I have reconstructed the trials and emotions of this lad of twenty.

II

Georges, having commenced his regular three years' military service in October, 1913,

got leave to visit his aunt who was keeping a *pension* in Paris.

How shy and confused he was when I came down to the dining-room that day and surprised him while he was examining his too-faint mustache with great seriousness before the mirror! Charming, I thought him, instantly; a clean, jolly sort of boy, quite too young for that ridiculous soldier's uniform.

His aunt introduced him (with her arm about his shoulder and a tweak of his ear) by his nickname, "Coco"; and, after he got used to my being a foreigner, he began to talk, using his big brown eyes and his free, expressive hands quite as much as his tongue. Knowing a little of the Midi, I attempted an imitation of the *patois*. Coco threw back his head and laughed with abandon. That broke the ice, and we became great friends.

He was so curious about everything American that I took him up to my salon to

see my typewriter; also my neckties and fancy socks.

"But what's this?" asked Coco, reading with his funny French pronunciation, "A-mer-i-cain Pencil Compagnie." It was a novelty, a "perpetual" pencil of the self-sharpening sort, with a magazine filled with little points like cartridges. When I gave it to him, it pleased Coco immensely.

"Just like a rifle!" he exclaimed, as he amused himself by pressing the end and ejecting the bits of lead. He went through the manual of arms with it, laughing; he did a mock bayonet thrust or two, and then aimed it at me in fun, like a child. "*Pan!*" he cried; "*that's* the way we shoot Germans!" The contrast of his red pantaloons and blue coat with the round, innocent face and lips parted like a girl's was absurd. Why, he was more like those doll soldiers you see at toyshops with curly hair! With his fresh

pink cheeks and big brown eyes he seemed no more than sixteen years old.

In the evening we all went out on the crowded Boulevard, where, it being a fête day, they were dancing in front of the open-air band stands. It was a long time before I ceased to think of Coco as jolly, flushed, exuberant, dancing the Tango on the corner by the Sorbonne with his pretty young aunt, as excited and happy as only a lad can be who has come up from a provincial town to see the metropolis for the first time on a holiday.

That was on the 14th of July of 1914. Next day he went back to his caserne at Montauban.

In two weeks war was declared!

Coco, our own blithe Coco, would have to go to the front — oh, his aunt's white face that day! — and Coco would be in the first line! It seemed like some hideous mistake.

But already Coco, pink-cheeked, laughing, shy, his mother's only boy, was well on his way toward the German shells and machine guns!

III

The French do nothing without a flavoring of sentiment. Rhetoric flowers in the official proclamations; it makes one laugh even to read the textbooks for soldiers, they are so strewn with fine, resounding phrases; and so, of course, it was quite impossible for Coco's regiment to get away without one of those stirring, gesticulative speeches by the colonel.

It was at the Toulouse railway station — parents in tears. The girls gazed admiringly. Gossipy veterans of '70, seeing themselves reincarnated in these fresh young soldiers, patronized them egregiously with advice. Coco and the other lads listened, but

did not hear; they were smiling at the girls sticking bouquets in their rifle barrels.

"Look back for the last time at your homes and your loved ones," cried the colonel, with all his badges on his breast, "and shed the tear without which our high sacrifice would not have its price. Lift up your hearts, and so forth, and so forth, my children — *en avant!*"

Children indeed they were, overflowing with the emotion of the south, these soldiers, and our Coco, with a gulp in his throat, seemed even more young than most. The war! How often had he heard it predicted for that year, or the next, or the next — the inevitable war that was to give France her long-hoped-for revenge. Now, it was actually here! No more blank cartridges, no more sham battles — *War!*

But Coco's tears soon dried. They were a merry lot, those twenty-year-old "*piou-*

pious," even on that tiresome trip to the front. The youngsters had the worst of it during the mobilization. They sat all that journey on rough-board temporary benches in the luggage vans. Starting and stopping, side-tracking and backing — munching the emergency rations (hard tack and canned beef), for mother's cheese and chocolate didn't last long — waving and yelling to the patriotic spectators along the line, it took them almost three days to reach Châlons.

At the military camp two more days were spent in concentration, exercises, and inspection. The last orders were received. Then, at five o'clock in the morning of the sixth of August, the column started for the frontier.

Coco was a private in the Tenth Company of the Twentieth Regiment of Infantry. His army corps, the Seventeenth, formed the

left wing of the Fourth Army. On their left, paralleling their march, was, first, General Ruffey's cavalry division, and beyond that the Fifth Army, under General Lanrezac. On the extreme left wing of the advance were the British. Meanwhile, marching on Lorraine and Alsace, were the Sixth and Seventh Armies. With all these columns hurrying to the front, filling all the roads, railway transportation was impossible. It was a march of some seventy miles to the frontier.

So, through the lovely forest of Argonne, the boys set out, singing and joking as they strode along. It was pleasant enough at first, a romantic adventure; but with his heavy rifle, his heavy cartridge belt and bayonet, and his musette full of food slung over his shoulder, it was not long before poor Coco began to get weary. On his back, with his knapsack, and his rolled overcoat and his tin

bidon and tin *gamelle,* with the intrenching tool and his share of the company's baggage, he carried fully sixty pounds. They marched on one side of the road. Along the other side automobiles whirled incessantly back and forth, motor busses filled with provisions rumbled along, dispatch bearers on motor-cycles, officers on horseback — raising dust a-plenty.

Coco's chum — his "*copain*" — was François Foulot, the son of a cabinetmaker in Toulouse, a big, athletic, kind-hearted chap with a bushy black pompadour. Coco had told me about him in Paris. The two boys were members of a little musical and dramatic club in Toulouse, and had been friends from childhood. You should hear Coco tell how, on that long march, François took care of him, carrying his rifle when Coco was tired, carrying even Coco's knapsack for him, helping him grease his boots at

night when Coco's feet began to blister. François was like a big brother.

At the nightly bivouacs along the road the two boys always slept side by side; that is, when they slept at all. The excitement (and the hard ground) for the first few nights kept them wide awake, in spite of their fatigue.

"*Mon Dieu,* how will this all end?" they asked each other. Coco didn't know, François didn't know; but neither thought the war could possibly last more than a few months.

IV

Yet there was a terrible earnestness about it all that sobered them. There was something still more terribly earnest ahead! Every automobile that whizzed past them, coming in hot haste from the front, announced it. Every galloping supply wagon, every crouching motorcyclist in uniform

flashing by told the same frantic story: "Hurry! Hurry! *Hurry!* The Germans are almost here! France is in danger!"

On those first nights, when Coco's turn came to stand on sentry duty by the lonely corner of a wood, his eyes strained into the darkness, listening for every sound, the sight of a bush waving in the wind often brought his gun to his shoulder with a quick, excited "*Halte-là!*"

For Coco, sensitive, earnest, and not a little fearful, was in a high nervous tension. Already the Germans were fighting in Belgium — the killing had commenced. From one of the villages they passed the boy wrote a brave little letter to his mother on a post card: "If anything should happen . . . well, one knows one's duty, and God will do the rest. Lovingly, Coco."

On, on, through the hilly forests of Ar-

gonne they marched, making about twenty-five miles a day. And on that dusty march food was scarce. Poor Coco's feet, despite the tallow in his socks, were too sore for him to chase chickens, but François succeeded in capturing seven. Not much, however, when their necks were wrung, for a company of 250 men. Even the bread began to run out. But on they went, singing by day and shivering by night — on, on toward Belgium. Coco says that their chief worry was lest they shouldn't find enough straw to sleep on, or at least enough to tie up their feet in bundles to keep them warm.

At Mouzon they crossed the Meuse, and here Coco slept more comfortably than he had for a week, on a sack full of straw at a farm. After a day's wait for orders — and no meat even here — they set out again, passed through Carignan, and soon reached the last village in France — Florenville.

"Don't send me any more French money," Coco here wrote to his mother. "It won't be any use to me now!" Poor Coco! How little did he know how soon he was to return!

V

On the morning of August 21 they crossed the boundary. Hurrahs from the men — they were going forward to conquer! They were going to deliver this brave little country from the barbaric invader who had laid it waste. Coco was thrilled with the nobility of their mission. *"Vive la France!"* he shouted with all the rest; but alas, the approaching thunderstorm soon damped his spirits. The rain poured down in torrents, down the back of his neck and into his shoes. Coming to a halt, they bivouacked in a wide field. It thundered and it lightened. Soaked and cheerless, the regiment tried

to sleep. The fires wouldn't burn. One couldn't even smoke a cigarette. As Coco turned on his side the water oozed under him sloshily.

He dozed off, however, after a while, only to be awakened by a punch in the ribs. "Listen!" François was saying. "What's *that?*"

"Thunder, of course!" Coco, irritated, rolled over again, opened his eyes after a while, and saw François still sitting up, alert.

"That's not thunder!" he exclaimed. "Listen! it's cannonading!"

Coco sat up now quickly enough. Others woke up to swear at them — and then they listened, too.

"Look!" cried François. Galloping down the road came a dispatch rider. He halted, was challenged by the sentry, and turned in at the colonel's headquarters. Then he was off again, splattering, clattering

through the mud. Then a bugle call: *"Fall in!"* All over the field the wet men jumped up, slung on their belts, grabbed their rifles and formed dismally in the rain. As they stood waiting, word ran down the column — François passed it to Coco — *"The enemy!"* An ammunition wagon drove up — boxes of cartridges were distributed. "Load!" ordered the captains. The ranks were fairly buzzing now, everyone asking questions, nobody answering. A whistle blew. *"Forward, march!"* Coco had no thought of the rain now! The guns grew louder, but still no enemy was visible. The cannonading slackened, grew faint, thundered off in another direction, died, began again far away. But the rumbling was always ahead — the regiment was marching nearer and nearer the fighting. And so on to Bertrix, fifteen miles from the frontier. Coco rather liked Bertrix. Bertrix rather

more than liked Coco. The pretty little Luxemburg town welcomed him and all the other young "*piou-pious*" as its saviors. Nothing was too good for the French soldier boys who had come to deliver them from the Huns. What do you want — cigarettes? beer? bacon? It was quite a jolly affair, with the streets full of smiling women and young girls smiling too, bringing fruit and eggs and preserves, and good, fresh butter.

Coco was already a hero — and, after eight days without meat, that bacon was certainly good! How they all laughed and chattered! But the old men stood apart and listened anxiously; for, through all that rejoicing there came steadily the distant sound of guns. Surely the Germans were coming nearer! If they ever got to Bertrix — The old men shook their heads with foreboding.

Again the whistle blew — *Forward!* The

enemy was only a few miles away now; it was getting exciting. The boys, proud, patriotic, confident, started "*La Marseillaise*" and the song was taken up by the whole column —"*Marchons! Marchons!*" they sang — but Coco was singing, he admits, to keep up his courage, as he tramped on through the mud to be shot at. He tried to keep in mind that he was marching on gloriously to fight for his country; but he couldn't help thinking of what he had heard of those terrible machine guns at Liége and Namur.

Halt! The captain whipped out his field glasses — everybody gazed eagerly ahead. There it was, *there!* coming steadily nearer, flying low — a German aeroplane — a "*Taube*" reconnoitering. There was a quick order. As the whir of the motor grew nearer the lieutenant of Coco's platoon pointed. "*Aim!*" Fifteen rifles were thrown up, covering the monoplane,

"Steady, now, men — wait till she comes near enough — now, *Fire!*"

Coco fired, jammed down the lever of his gun, shot again, again. Almost over their heads the flyer seemed to stop, turned, volplaned swiftly down — it was too good to be true — swept lower in a wide curve. Then men, shouting, ran for it as it swooped into the field beside the road. Coco ran for his first sight of a German.

Two officers in khaki, limp and pale, were strapped to the seats. One was unconscious, with a red hole in his neck. The other painfully unfastened his strap, and came forward, staggering. He saluted the captain stiffly, a queer smile on his blond German face. Coco heard him say in perfect French:

"I am badly wounded, monsieur. This is my last trip, I'm afraid. Ah, well; you are going to beat us in the end, no doubt. With all your allies there's little hope for us.

But you'll have to shed a good deal of blood before you win!" Then he suddenly collapsed. Coco saw him fall on the ground in a faint.

"It gave me a mighty queer feeling," Coco told me, "to look at that dark spot of blood gradually growing bigger and bigger over that officer's breast. I remember that I wondered if it had been my rifle ball that had wounded him. And that other German, too — I wondered if I had already killed a man. If I had, why wasn't it murder? What was the difference between war and murder, anyway? Of course these barbarians were invading my country, but — yes, it was my duty to protect France, but — well, I had to give it up. You know there are priests fighting in the ranks, too, in this war, m'sieur! *They* must know. It's all right, I suppose — and yet there is always that '*but*' when you see a thing like that. Well,

it was too exciting then for much philosophy. You see, the cannons were getting louder all the time, and the whistle blew and we marched on again. But somehow we didn't feel much like singing any more!"

Near rising ground they halted. The officers hurried forward, and with field glasses inspected the country ahead; then called the column on. Now they were actually in the danger zone — a wide expanse of fields, dotted with farms here and there, and across, a mile away, were woods, dark, sinister. It was a sunny afternoon; the odor of the damp, warm earth was clean and pungent. There were wide stretches of yellow stubble fields, where the wheat had been lately cut. Some sheaves were still standing, as if the war had interrupted the harvest, half done.

As they advanced cautiously the cannonading ceased. Somehow to Coco the silence was more dreadful even than that incessant

muffled reverberation. But those woods yonder — what dangers were *they* hiding? Every eye was strained in that direction.

Deploying to the left of the road, Coco's company made for a whitewashed farmhouse half a mile away, across the fields. The other companies fanned out to either side.

No one seemed to know just what was going to happen. Coco's lieutenant, a jolly, talkative young fellow who had always used to keep his platoon roaring at his jokes, was now unwontedly serious and silent. Coco watched him. He marched on with his field glasses held constantly to his eyes, tripping over roots and bushes and stones and swearing as he went.

On and on toward that dark, mysterious wood through beet fields, across ditches, over hedges they went, till they came to a crossroad leading into the farm. Here they halted.

Coco, nervous, apprehensive, jumped at hearing his name called out. "*Cucurou! Bracques! Lemaitre!* Go forward and reconnoiter! Careful, now, men!"

VI

Coco wondered why they had to call on *him;* but, well, it had to be done, his duty, and he did it. With a man on either side of him he walked forward gingerly through a field where cows were grazing, nearer and nearer that horrible wood. He didn't dare look at the ground; as he stumbled on his eyes never left that wood, so deathly still and mysterious. *Were* there Germans hidden in those trees? It was his duty to find out. Bracques and Lemaitre didn't falter; so Coco didn't falter. He kept right on, nearer and nearer. His one idea was the importance of first seeing the enemy.

Then, suddenly, he heard a high, sharp whistling through the air, and the bullet spattered the earth viciously in front of him. A report cracked lazily out from the trees. Another whistle, another, and the pattering grew nearer. Coco dropped flat on the ground, and crawled cautiously up to a big rock and looked over the top, watching. Still nothing was visible. The balls came faster now; but he crawled warily forward, dragging himself along the ground a little further.

Lemaitre yelled, "Come on back! we've drawn their fire — that's enough," and Coco, with his heart thumping, was glad enough to return, running for all he was worth till he had reached his company. The men were fretful and restless with excitement, nervous, exclamatory. With a high, snoring drone, a German shell came driving through the air — a boom from the woods — then a sudden,

terrifying crash as of thunder let loose as it burst in the rear. Coco turned to see a volcano of black smoke and earth behind him. "*Lie down!*" shouted the officers, and the men only too willingly dropped flat in the road. "At first," said Coco, "the men lay looking up into the air trying to see the shells — imagining that they really could! But when the things dropped closer, they began to dodge — as if one could escape them *that* way!" More shells came, and more, buzzing through the air in a screeching crescendo, bursting with appalling smashes nearer and nearer the line. Then a whistle blew. *Forward!* All along the front men jumped up, ran ahead, dropped, then rose and ran further in a long, irregular skirmish line, toward that vicious wood. As they advanced, the cannonading burst into a double, triple fury, and the harsh barking of machine guns began — and never once stopped. A hundred

yards from the trees the whistle blew again to halt, and then the din grew unbearable, a crashing thunder with shells bursting here, there, in front, behind, in continual explosion. Swept by that murderous tornado, they had to lie down and wait. And wait. And wait. And wait. . . .

A scream of agony! Coco saw on his left a geyser of débris — clods of earth, stones, dust, and smoke, and two men thrown bodily upward. Another crash — *nearer* — he saw men's heads and torn-off limbs flying past him. Coco himself, when he rose on one knee to fire (for he was emptying his rifle madly into the wood now), was thrown down again and again by the concussion of the air. He saw sudden upheavals appear — dirt, maimed bodies, rocks, knapsacks, rifles, thrown every way — and a hole would be left big enough for half a dozen men to take refuge in. Once he himself was buried up to

his waist with flying dirt, his eyes were filled with dust and he could hardly breathe — the noxious fumes of the lyddite choked him. And always in his ears the incessant crash, bang, crash of the devastating, bursting shells till he couldn't think. *"Lie down! Lie down!"* the officers shouted continually, but the men were now frenzied with the slaughter; they were on their knees, on their feet, shooting insanely into that secret, hellish wood, screaming curses.

And, all the time, where was the enemy? Nobody knew. Oh, if it had only come to a reckless charge against no matter what force, it would at least have been a chance for revenge; they would have gone forward like mad dogs. But instead, they had to wait — wait — wait to be killed! Coco saw his friends wounded one by one. Coco said: "Each man when he was hit would throw his arms up over his head — always, it was that

same gesture — and then he would fall, bleeding."

VII

The nerve-racking, deafening din went on and on without a respite. Bracques was hit in the head — he was a living, breathing horror, his whole jaw gone — one hand plucking at his coat. He lay grotesquely uncomfortable on his back; rolling this way and rolling that way on his knapsack and his tin gamelle and the dozen other accouterments he couldn't get rid of. A dozen lads he had gone to school with in Toulouse were screaming. One called for his mother again and again, *"Maman! Maman! Maman!"* Most of the wounded lay still in their blood, or moaned and writhed in their agony. On Coco's left, he said, was a body without a head. Coco, he confessed, thought more than once of running. What was the use of

staying only to be butchered? They could do no good that way. But still the regiment held its place; yes, but the regiment was getting strangely thin. It could not last long.

Coco looked round for François, who should have been beside him. There he was, close by, grinning. He called out something to keep up Coco's courage, but in that inferno Coco couldn't hear a word. Then, instantly, there was a gigantic explosion; and when Coco rose again, he looked — he grew numb. There was François on his back — with both legs queerly bent in an impossible position. With a sickening wave of nausea Coco saw that both the boy's legs were shockingly crushed, all but torn off, and his red pantaloons were soaking in blood. François's face was horrible now; his eyes were shining wildly. Coco, shrinking with horror, managed to crawl toward him. . . .

In the hospital at Toulouse, when Coco told me this, lying in his cot, he shrank convulsively into himself with horror, just as he must have recoiled, I fancy, that day. He wouldn't look at me. His eyes were fixed on the window. Coco told me then that François's legs were torn "quite off"—he was sure of it; but I imagine that, in his agony of horror, Coco must have been mistaken, or François would have bled to death very quickly. Coco says he lived for nearly three-quarters of an hour. At any rate, his chum was done for, and suffering torments unspeakable.

"He just looked at me and begged me to kill him," said Coco, his eyes still on the window. "He said"—Coco could hardly speak now—"he said if—I was his friend—I'd finish him—so he wouldn't suffer. There was such a terrible noise of the shells bursting that I couldn't quite hear at first—

I had to hold my head close to get what he said. . . . He said — if he had helped me, ever — now was my chance to be his friend . . . and put him out of his misery. . . ."

We were silent for a while. I was looking at him, getting up my courage to ask a question. Finally I dared. I simply *had* to ask it:

"*Did* you do it, Coco?"

The tears poured into Coco's eyes now. He shook his head slowly, without a word.

"Do you regret not having — done what he wanted, Coco?"

Coco said simply, "I don't know. *I* would have wanted to die quickly. Perhaps as his friend I ought to have done it. But I am a good Catholic, you know, m'sieur; and I was taught that it is a sin to take human life." Quite naturally he added: "And yet I suppose I have killed a lot of Germans." He shook his head wearily. "I can't under-

stand it. I must leave it for the church to decide. I did the best I could. . . ."

VIII

At last he turned and looked at me with an expression that made me feel guilty enough at having asked. " But that isn't all, m'sieur; I haven't told you the worst part yet. Last week his father — François's father — came here to see me. He asked me if I knew anything about François — how he died. What could I say? Of course I couldn't tell him. I saw him fall — that's all I said. And I was glad, then, that I hadn't done it. . . . No, I can't talk about it any more, m'sieur. Don't ask me to, please! "

IX

For two hours the Twentieth Regiment endured the storm of shell. To advance a

regiment of infantry like that without artillery support was surely an incredible piece of criminal stupidity. Some one had blundered. But there were many blunders in those early days of the campaign, and the truth hasn't all come out even yet.

One interesting fact, however, did come out; although Coco didn't hear of it for several days. It was a piece of sublime sentimentality impossible in any other than a French army; quite consistent with the character of the romantic, high-spirited colonel who had orated so grandiloquently at the Toulouse railway station. The night before the battle of Bertrix, the colonel had done a strange thing; he had, in the presence of his staff, burned the regimental colors. The enemy was in countless force against him. His Gallic sense of honor, when he was ordered to attack an impregnable position, told him that there was only one thing to do. He

must go forward with his men, and die — but the flag must not be captured.

And so, go forward and die he did, that gallant old man. As Coco lay, under that August sun, in the rain of bursting shells, he heard a bugle ring out on the left flank. Four companies rose to their feet and charged that murderous wood. At their head the colonel ran, waving his sword — yes, just like the battle pictures, Coco swears — ran for a few hundred yards toward his inevitable death, and dropped — with his honor unsullied. Behind him his men dropped, too, in appalling numbers — dropped singly and in bunches till they faltered, stopped, then fell back.

At this, the whistles blew at last for the general retreat.

It was high time; for, at the sight of this destruction all over the field, men had already begun to jump up and run toward the

rear. Now they all ran — everybody ran — with the shells and shrapnel chasing them. They threw away their knapsacks, they threw away their guns, they ran screaming and crying like children.

Coco threw away his knapsack and musette, too, but kept his rifle as he ran, making for a shelter in the woods on the other side of the road. "You've no idea how much worse they were, those shells; when I had turned my back I expected to be hit every moment. My spine fairly cringed." The remnants of the colonel's four companies were pulled together and attempted to cover the retreat. But the regiment had stampeded. The officers shouted and swore, they struck men with their swords, some were even shot, but nothing could stop the rout.

X

It was more than a rout, it was a panic. Into the wood the shells followed them — there seemed to be no escape. Every moment they expected to see the uhlans charging them down. Dodging this way, that way, deafened, shouting over here — over there — the shells dropping to right, to left, as if from the clouds, the men, breathless, exhausted, poured out upon a road, to stagger back almost run over by a clattering battery of guns galloping, too late, galloping toward the firing line. They stopped to pant, and rest; and then ran on.

In half an hour they were out of the range of the German artillery, and they halted exhausted, shamefaced, sick with terror and despair. The officers, too heartbroken even to swear at them, reformed their men with difficulty, and, herding them like frightened

sheep, fell back in something like order till they came upon a line of trenches that had been occupied by the Germans.

The pits were filled instantly, and the men were beginning to regain their calmness and courage, when from a near-by hill the terrifying cannonade recommenced. The butchery recommenced — the explosions, and the screams.

Out of the trenches came all that were left alive, and there was no stopping the army now, till, hurrying all night long without food and rest, demoralized, it found its way back to Mouzon. Here the Seventeenth Corps was pulled together for a hasty review. The roll call showed that in Coco's regiment there were 1,443 dead, wounded, or missing — fully one-third of its strength gone.

The men were in a fury of disappointment and rage against the generals who had been responsible for the massacre. Where was

the artillery? Where were the stretcher bearers? Where were the ambulances and surgeons? Not one did Coco see during the battle, after the battle — nor even during that whole terrible retreat.

And it wasn't at Mouzon alone that there was wondering, complaining, raging at the failure of the campaign. On the left wing the British expeditionary force, hot with rage at not being supported by General Percin, was falling back from defeat at Mons to pursuit at Bavay — and it was not yet out of danger. On the right, the Fifteenth Corps (fat cowards of the Midi) had turned tail and run in Lorraine. Oh, there was something rotten somewhere. Paris was wild. The Government was shuffled, and the President dealt out a new hand — his high trump was Millerand, new Minister of War, but his right bower was Joffre, commander in chief, of whom all the world was soon to hear. To

Coco at Mouzon, the news came that the Fourth Army was to be commanded by General de Langle de Carry. Little did Coco care who commanded it. Much more important than that was that he would get one night's good sleep on a sack of straw.

By this time the boy had begun to realize what war meant. That night he wrote to his aunt: "I have received my baptism of fire, but I am unhurt. It was terrible. Don't be frightened, and be sure and write to my mother that you have had good news from me." He signed the post card for the first time "Georges." Coco had begun to be a man.

If it has ever been your lot to go without having your clothes off for two weeks — to march through dust and mud in them, sleep in them, fight in them, run in them — then you'll understand how Georges Cucurou longed for a swim in the river Meuse — to bathe his

poor, aching blistered feet. But no — up and out again at six o'clock next morning! Off on the road toward Belgium again. A counter-attack. All day and all night they marched.

XI

There was no singing, this time. The Twentieth was smarting with the shame of its defeat; it was savage for revenge; but, held in reserve behind the battle line, it had to wait listening to the booming cannon and the crackle of machine guns for an impatient hour — then they were ordered back to Mouzon.

At Mouzon, news of a fresh defeat awaited them. The town was now distraught, terror-stricken by the ever-nearing, ever-increasing thunder of the German cannonade. When Georges arrived at midnight, almost every house was lighted. The frenzied in-

habitants were packing up or hiding their belongings, ready to fly. The "Bosches" were coming!

At dawn, Georges, sleeping by the roadside, was awakened to see a pathetic procession of refugees hurrying away to safety. Pathetic? It was tragic, comic, grotesque, sublime! Everyone was dressed in his best clothes; everyone carried bundles, carried hens, carried trunks, carried the Lord knows what — and the memories of 1870 to boot! Wagon after wagon passed, piled high with furniture, bags, boxes, baskets, and provisions, with women and children atop, and cows tied on behind. Whole families — three generations — trudged on foot, men and women and children, children, children, children, and weeping old grandmothers trundled along in wheelbarrows.

XII

It was a bitter sight for Georges, burning to defend his country. What was the French army good for, anyway, if it couldn't protect this pretty, innocent little town, so charmingly scattered over the wooded heights of the Meuse? But Mouzon was doomed. Already the sappers with wires and sticks of melinite were blowing up the picturesque old stone bridge.

All next day Georges's regiment, hidden in the woods, watched the shelling of the town; all next night, hungry, soaked with rain, enraged, they saw it burn, house by house, till at last the flames licked up the belfry of the church. That was the way they defended Mouzon.

Another day; another night of drenching rain in those wretched sopping woods, while the German guns boomed all about them.

Georges and two other boys succeeded in building a dirty little shelter of branches covered with wet straw, and they crawled underneath. Water-soaked, the clumsy thing collapsed on top of them in the middle of the night; but, heavy with soldiers' sleep, it took more than that to wake them. In the morning, however, a shell bursting only a few yards away did succeed in bringing them stumbling out from under the soggy mass — to find to their amazement that their regiment had already departed!

XIII

The shells began to fall thicker and faster; the Germans were indubitably near at hand. But where the devil was the regiment? There was no knowing, except that it was pretty sure to be getting away from those harrying shells. Chilled, the boys ran

through the dripping woods till they came to a clearing. Here, looking down, they saw the Germans fording the Meuse! But not without trouble; a French battery had got their range, and was playing red havoc with them, slinging shell after shell of well-aimed shrapnel. By dozens they melted away under the fire, and the water was full of bobbing corpses drifting downstream.

"We just burst out laughing," said Georges. "We couldn't help it. Not that it was so funny to see men killed like that by the hundreds, but, after all *we* had gone through — after the ghastly way we had been butchered at Bertrix, it really did me good to see those 'Bosches' suffering themselves at last!"

He didn't laugh long. With the German reckless sacrifice of life, column after column was thrown into the river, until more and more got across. It was time for the boys

to be moving now, and they set out toward the westward, tramped all day, eating nothing but the raw beets they dug up in the fields, and finally found the Seventeenth Corps at Raucourt.

They were just in time to join their regiment as it was ordered forward seven more miles for a new engagement. There, protected by the French batteries, they bivouacked. Glad enough was Georges of a chance to sleep. No fear of the coming battle could keep him awake by this time.

At dawn, while the vigilant searchlights were still playing across the opposite hillside, the French guns started firing, and, without breakfast, Georges's battalion was ordered forward. In half an hour the enemy was discovered half a mile away. In the valley between opposite hills the shells were screeching now over their heads — from the French "75's" the sound of the whizzing

projectiles came high and dry like buzz saws — they burst with the awful battering of near-by thunder. The German "*marmites*" snorted through the air, and exploded with a deeper, more terrible crash. The regiment halted, and was deployed in four ranks — the first two lying on the ground, the third and fourth kneeling.

The men were mostly quite cool, but Georges confessed that he himself had hard work controlling his nerves while he waited for that attack. In ten minutes the enemy appeared from behind rising ground and came on — a long, gray-black line of thousands and thousands of men, a *thick* line, swarming, multitudinous, nearer and nearer.

"Load!" coolly commanded the captains; "500 meters. Ready, now — *fire!*" Their salvo rang out. The heavy rows of Germans seemed to hesitate for a moment; but no, they were only stopping to fire.

There came a sudden whistling in the air all about and the bullets flew —" for a terribly long minute," as Georges described it — then the enemy came on again, and kept on coming, in a broad, thick wave, company after company. And only a battalion of four companies to resist them! Georges fired without aiming. What was the use of aiming at that horde of men? The boys jumped to their feet, fired again and again, and then, as their comrades dropped about them everywhere, they began to retreat, some picking up the wounded as they went. At first they withdrew in order, turning back to fire another volley; but when the Germans fixed their bayonets and came at them on the double-quick, the French broke, and ran for it, helter-skelter, this way and that, in a second rout, even worse than the first.

Georges ran with the rest, and the shrapnel followed him, killing men on either hand,

in front, behind. Then, over the rise, came the uhlans, yelling, galloping in to cut them up. Looking back, Georges saw the cavalry sabering and lancing, and he ran like a deer for his life, ran up the hillside, ran into the woods. He ran for at least a mile with the thunder of the cannon still in his ears. When, finally, he stopped to take breath, it was only a fragment of his company that he found near him — some ten or eleven men, among them a sergeant. Where were the others? Nobody knew. The regiment, demoralized, had split up into numberless terrified detachments, and wandered all over the countryside. Such was the inglorious battle of Raucourt. Of the week following Georges could give no consecutive account. He remembers only that he and the others tramped and tramped for miles inquiring of peasants, gendarmes, of the stragglers, everyone, everywhere, the whereabouts of

the Twentieth Regiment. They climbed over hills, they rested in little deserted villages where every house was gutted of furniture, doors open, rooms littered, and here and there a starved cat or two, lean and wild. The roads were alive with refugees, French and Belgian, all plodding mournfully toward the south, dreary processions of wagons and cattle and weeping women, children, and stony-eyed, sulky men. No, nobody had seen the Twentieth Regiment.

They tramped from Villers to Malmy, and, apparently (Georges isn't quite sure where they *did* go), from Malmy to Maire. At Le Vivier, or perhaps it was Mont Dieu, they found an infantry regiment, but it was not their own. The Twentieth should be down Vouziers way, said the officers. So they trudged on.

More and more stray men had joined Georges's party. Few of them had knap-

sacks, some didn't even have guns. Hats of all kinds; costumes — promiscuous but all disheveled. They were, by this time, a villainously whiskered lot — ragged, dirty, weary, famished, sullen, desperate — without discipline, without leaders. Occasionally, in some ransacked village they found stale bread or vegetables that they cooked in the woods; whatever else they ate was begged from the few frightened peasants that still remained on their farms.

There was one village, however, that Georges did remember, and that was Les Alleux. There he slept in an actual bed. How Les Alleux happened to be abandoned with all its houses undisturbed — with the clocks still going and the furniture in place, even the beds made up — Georges doesn't know. Some sudden alarm had evidently caused the inhabitants to fly at a moment's notice. What mainly interested him was

that they had left their barnyards full of poultry.

Les Alleux was almost gay. There were some hundred soldiers collected there, now; all tatterdemalion stragglers from the rout, making the most of their unexpected good luck. There was almost everything to eat except bread. Georges fairly gorged himself on hot roast chicken and cheese, made merry with the rabble of soldiery, sang, smoked, and then slept for twelve solid hours, with his boots off on a delectable feather bed *and sheets*. And, for once, without the din of cannon in his ears.

This, however, was hardly the way to save his country. Georges's conscience and the booming of German guns awoke him to his duty next morning. The mob scattered, fleeing south in a hurry. Georges's party, he found when they started, had grown smaller. "I don't know whether or not I ought to

mention this detail," he told me, "but at least it will show that I wasn't quite so bad as the rest. But I think some of the boys found citizens' clothes in the houses there at Les Alleux, and got away in them. At any rate, they didn't come along with us."

His Odyssey ended at a village called Pauvres on the highroad between Rethel and Vouziers. Here they found what was left of the Twentieth Regiment, and Georges was welcomed like one from the dead. All received new rifles and accouterments, and the regiment was reorganized. Of its three battalions there remained hardly enough to form two — a third was made up of waifs and strays from other divisions.

XIV

The Twentieth Regiment now contained a sad and sorry lot of men, weary, discouraged,

shamefaced, and sullen at their double defeat. But when they heard that the army was to retreat still further, and abandon all this rich, flourishing northern country to the invaders without a blow — why, it was incredible! What was the matter? Where were their reënforcements? Only fifteen days ago they had been marching enthusiastically up through the lovely forest of Argonne. Now they were going to retreat into Champagne. But they were too busy with preparations to spend much time sulking. The officers declared that they would lead their men to victory yet. So the retreat commenced to the booming accompaniment of the threatening German artillery.

Little did Georges know of cool old General Joffre and his desperate plans. Little did he imagine that the endless falling back, falling back, falling back through Champagne was to go down into history as a masterpiece

of Fabian strategy. All he understood of that campaign was — day after day of retreating along the hard white roads, then into the fields and digging trenches; night after night standing ready in those clayey shoulder-deep holes, waiting for an attack, while the first line of the rear guard fought constantly with the enemy. So they did their best to hold back the flood of invaders. So they struggled with the booming cannon ever following them. It was hard, sour work! The men, exhausted with the digging and the marching and the watching, with their few hours' sleep constantly interrupted by alarms, trudged hopelessly southward, too glum to talk. Constantly the officers encouraged them —"Just to that hill there, men! Come on!" but it took more than their optimism to restore the courage of the troops. Man after man stopped, absolutely incapable of going further, and slumped down by the side

of the road only to be forced on, kicked on again by the corps of gendarmes which followed the march. If the column halted for a minute, half the men fell instantly asleep as they stood.

The minute the trenches were dug they had to prepare to receive the enemy. Mighty little food these days, and no fresh meat. Even water was scarce, as the men were forbidden to drink of springs till they had been inspected. Georges's regiment was, for the most part of the retreat, held in the second line of the rear guard, and he was, therefore, in but one actual engagement. In the general campaign it was called, probably, only "a sharp skirmish." But, to Georges, it was one of those crises when life says: "Come! Move up a notch!"

"I was on sentry duty at the end of the trench where the company was sleeping," said Georges. "On Tuesday, the 2d of

September it was, near Souain. I knew everyone's life depended on me, and it was a terrible strain. You know the enemy was always right on our heels, night and day. M'sieu, I was just all eyes, searching everywhere through the dark. It must have been about two in the morning, when I thought I saw something moving on the opposite hillside. At first I wasn't quite sure. I had to pull my eyes away deliberately, and rest them on something else — you know how your eyes get when you stare too hard and too long; but then, when I looked again quickly, I was sure. Yes, the 'Bosches' were coming! It was horrible. I saw them creeping from one bush to another like snakes.

"I kicked the sergeant who was snoring at my feet and pointed. Instantly all our men were quietly awakened. My lieutenant told me to stay where I was and pretend not

to see anything; but to choose my man and be ready to fire. Yes, monsieur; it was a ticklish job; I felt rather queer, I confess. I knew that I would be the very first one to be shot at. That was about the longest fifteen minutes I ever spent.

"Well, we let them crawl up, crawl up, to within a hundred meters and then just as they all jumped to their feet, the lieutenant shouted: 'Fire at will!' I was ready for the foremost man, and I let him have it right through the forehead. Here is his helmet, monsieur; see that hole?"

In the hospital at Toulouse, while I listened to his story, he held up a black helmet, trimmed with brass — with a spiked top. It had never left him since that day.

Yes, I saw that hole — the hole where he had killed his man. But, when I saw him look at that German helmet, there was an expression on his face that baffled me. I

didn't know what it meant, but I knew that Coco wasn't there — Coco, with the lead pencil! No, this was a new person now on that bed in front of me. It was Georges Cucurou — and he would never be a boy again!

XV

During that terrible retreat, Georges, had been a part of a working, fighting machine, tried to his utmost in mind and body. He had been hammered, hammered into shape. Hunger and fatigue had hardened him. Every day his nerves had been getting more tough and strong. If his duty consisted of retreating, digging, sleeping three or four hours a day, going without meat and often without water or wine, he could do it.

On a post card, scrawled in haste from somewhere (no postmark, no date, no indica-

tion of any locality being permitted), he wrote to his aunt:

DEAR AUNT: *If we keep on retreating like this, we may perhaps get to Paris. I should be very glad to see you, of course, but I hope not. There must soon be an end of all this digging and digging, and victory will be ours. I am afraid you wouldn't recognize your Georges.*

Indeed, she wouldn't have recognized him, but, not only because for weeks he had the dirt caked in his hands and hair and ears, and his uniform hung on him in rags, but partly too because already in his face there was beginning to show something more unlike the old Coco we had known than all that change in his outward self could make him. He had learned patience, perseverance, caution, confidence in his officers, and faith in the ulti-

mate victory. He was uplifted by that great wave of high idealism that was transforming France.

Why that steady retreat, further and further south? Georges and Georges's company, now that they were tempered by experience, now that they were raging to attack, couldn't understand. But still they retreated and retreated. Back to Suippes they came.

It was a queer entrance that regiment made into Suippes. On the road, they had overtaken a troop of refugees who, utterly exhausted, could travel no further. The peasants had a panic of alarm at sight of the column, thinking that the Germans were already upon them. It was hard work reassuring them; and it ended in a comedy, the soldiers taking a hand at the migration. Old women were mounted in the handcarts they had been trying to pull and were given a ride into town. Soldiers unharnessed the don-

keys and put the children on their backs. They pushed at the wagons, they helped along the graybeards, they carried babies in their arms. Georges, I think, must have begun to realize that he had grown up when he, a veteran now, marched into Suippes, carrying a big basket for a lad of fifteen who looked up to his soldier protector admiringly, and called him "M'sieu."

No Frenchman will ever forget that dreadful first week of September, 1914. Every day the Germans grew nearer Paris, every day their cowardly aeroplanes sailed over the capital and dropped their futile threats. What was the French army doing? We hoped they were merely luring the enemy toward the forts of Paris where the big guns could smash them. But could the army hold the enemy back, even with that assistance? Paris was all nervous apprehension. Then that astounding news — the German army,

almost within striking distance, was swerving to the southeast! What did it mean?

To Georges Cucurou, retreating before those hammering, hammering guns, that quick change in direction was quite as mysterious. From Suippes his regiment, without stopping to entrench now, marching day and night, instead of keeping on toward Paris, swung sharply to the east, along the road to Ste. Menehould. Then, as suddenly, they turned back again into Châlons.

Heavy cannonading was coming now from almost every direction except the south. Every man was tense with excitement — battle was in the air — surely *something* was going to happen, *must* happen! But further and further south they marched; and along the roads, now, the automobiles were flying like mad, night and day, some with officers, some flying the Red Cross flag. Over their heads there were French aeroplanes, every

day the sky was never quite free of them. Georges caught his first sight of a British soldier — a khaki-clad dispatch rider on a motorcycle flying past, and another. They passed hundreds of Paris autobusses at the Division Headquarters, a long, long line that filled the village street at Sompuis, and ambulances, and cycle companies, and farriers' wagons, the portable forges glowing red in the evening darkness. Georges recognized the Senegalese spahis in red flowing robes, he saw the Turcos from Morocco — big children they were, grinning black faces with shiny white teeth. A wagon flew past, with men inside feeding out telephone wire, hooking it with long poles into the ditch, or over bushes, out of the way, as they galloped on. Best of all, he began to get fresh meat for dinner, from the portable kitchens that hurried from company to company along the road. But always, never stopping, night or

day, more exciting than all the rest, never forgotten, no matter what happened, in the north, growing ever nearer — the steady rumbling thunder of the German guns.

XVI

The camp of Mailly was a busy place. At the aeroplane sheds the biplanes and Blériots were constantly going and coming, circling in the air, or making ready in long rows upon the level field. The vast plain was filled with troops of all sorts in seemingly inextricable confusion: chasseurs, on horseback, in pale blue tunics, the Alpine chasseurs, with drooping blue *berets* on their heads, and leggings; cuirassiers with their breastplates and long horsehair plumes, and zouaves with embroidered jackets and baggy red trousers. The Twentieth Regiment, tattered and tired, with many heads bandaged and many with

feet through their shoes, dusty, hollow-eyed, marched past, not yet too despairing, as fresh troops greeted them, to cry in answer *"Vive la France!"* They were not boys now, they were soldiers tempered in the crucible of war. And among them marched Georges Cucurou, with a Prussian helmet tied to his knapsack with a shoestring — a Prussian helmet with a hole through its brass front!

Already rumors were flying fast from column to column. Why this concentration of troops? Why this wide circle swung around the camp of Mailly? *Mon Dieu!* could it be that they were to retreat no longer? That, at last, they were to make a stand? A hope like a gaining fire sprang up and swept from man to man.

It was early in the morning of Sunday, September 6, that on the heights south of Mailly the regiment was assembled for re-

view. To the accompaniment of an incessant, raging bombardment from the German cannon, the colonel read aloud this message from General Joffre, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces:

Children of France, the hour of the great battle has arrived! Lift up your hearts! If you wish your Country everlasting honor, let every man die at his post, if necessary, rather than surrender another inch of ground, and the victory will be ours.

It was not Gallic sentimentality now. It was the voice of a leader who wasted no words.

There was a shout of rejoicing—"*Vive la France!*" Emotion swept the ranks and men wept without shame. The tremendous suggestion put into those thousands of minds had a terrible potency. Georges said that

morning he felt as if he were intoxicated; he grew suddenly like a giant. It seemed as if nothing on earth could possibly resist them, now.

Bread and biscuits were handed out and the Twentieth Regiment was hurried to a wood two miles away. Already they had begun to move northward. But again it was their fate to be held in reserve, while the brunt of the attack was given to other troops. The Twentieth was held in the woods all day, all night, while the shells rained in from every direction. Most fell in front or behind, but occasionally a "*marmite*" would hit the column with devastating fury, and send its mutilated victims flying. There was nothing for it, however, but to stay and stay on, till the last man was killed if need were. Whatever happened, the Germans must *not* get by!

At dawn, they advanced to the edge of the

woods; but, the instant they emerged into the fields, shells and shrapnel poured on them in a torrent. So they held their post. Monday passed without their stirring from those woods. No commissary wagons came with food — nothing could live in the open. They munched their emergency rations, dry biscuits. Monday night, Tuesday, Tuesday night, and still they stayed. A dispatch rider, wounded in the arm, brought orders for them to hold hard and never flinch.

Nothing to eat now but grains of coffee. The water was gone from their canteens, long ago; but the men stretched out their overcoats in the rain, and drank the pools of water as fast as they collected. And, always, night and day, the thunder of the German guns about them. The din was so terrific that the men had fairly to shout to each other — they were almost deaf.

XVII

On Wednesday morning another messenger got through with orders to advance. From that corpse-strewn wood there emerged a band of men that might have been taken for theatrical desperadoes. Uniforms in shreds, coats gone, shoes gone, knees sticking through trousers legs, and elbows through sleeves, all plastered with mud to a uniform gray, like khaki; wild-eyed with hunger and reckless now, everyone's nerves on edge, cursing, weeping, mad, ready for anything except more inaction!

Forward! The men, famished as they were, yelled at the sound of that welcome word. Anywhere, out of that infernal wood — anywhere, through any hell, to get at the enemy! Forward they went on the run like hounds after hare, and the run warmed them up. The sun came out and they raced on,

steaming. "We didn't mind the shells at all, then," said Coco. "Lying on the ground waiting for them at Bertrix we had nothing to do but be afraid — but now we had no time. All we thought of was to get at those cursed 'Bosches' as fast as we could." And so through the bursting shells, across the wide field to rising ground.

It was there, on that hillside, they got a sight of what had happened during those deadly days along the Marne. First, rows and rows of twisted, limp-lying Frenchmen, dead for long, thrown by the shells into horribly fantastic groups; and sickening heads and limbs lying scattered alone. Bodies everywhere, mostly resting face up to the sky, eyes open, staring. In places they were stretched regularly in long straight lines; on other fields the corpses were dotted all about singly. "One had to jump over them every minute," said Georges. Further on, the

French dead were mingled with Germans, piled sometimes four high like a football scrimmage.

Then, in a sparsely wooded tract they passed the relics of a bayonet fight — fearful! Apparently, the French African troops had chased a battalion of retreating Germans up against a wall, and the bodies were, well — the "Turcos" do not stab merely in the breast — they do not stab merely to kill — they stab anywhere, they stab joyfully, like demons.

More and more German dead were passed, leaped over, even trod on where the way was narrow, and still the thundering of cannon came from every side. It seemed as if the whole world were fighting — as if all the old quiet ways of life had ceased to exist, even in memory. Still they pushed forward, marched to the west of Vitry-le-François, crossed the Marne on a pontoon bridge at

Blacy under a rain of rifle fire, and hurried through a beet field for a crest above the long, white, poplar-lined national road at Couvrol.

The "Bosches" were in retreat! A motorcyclist, racing from Vitry to Châlons with dispatches, had stopped to yell out the news.

As Georges struggled desperately up through the soft loam, his view was extended over the country about the Marne. Here, on those same wide rolling plains, Attila and all his Huns had fought his ancestors when France was but a nucleus of scattered Roman settlements; and here that horde had been defeated and driven back to their wildernesses. Now, no matter in which direction he gazed, he could see the modern barbarians strewing destruction. Puffs of smoke were in the air everywhere, but thickest about Vitry-le-François.

The shells from the French "75's" burst beautifully with a cloud of jet black and white. The fleecy snowy-white puffs, gray red in the center, showed where the shrapnel sent its shower of leaden balls. But, oftener than all the rest, came the droning "*marmites*" of the German big guns, bursting with heavy thunder in a sudden reddish flash, changing into a spume of drab smoke, edged with white.

To the westward, village after village was smoking. Machine guns were spitting, crackling along the roads, volleys of rifle fire snapped from every wood. Up and up went the Twentieth Regiment, till it came to the top of the little hill.

Smack-bang in their faces, a salvo of bullets greeted the men. Another volley, another! Georges, staggering back, taken by surprise with the others, as men dropped all about him, caught sight on a low hillside be-

yond of a deep gray mass of men extended in battle front only a hundred meters away. There, waiting to hold back the advance, was at least a full regiment of infantry — one of those hundreds of little rear guards that were left absolutely unsupported, to cover the German retreat, and to fight to the death without hope of success.

The Twentieth, rallying instantly, shouted a defiant answer to the German "Hurrahs," and sent its volley into the enemy. Beside Georges, a man named Charles Griffe, one of the few of his friends left from Toulouse, suddenly fell, clasping his hands over his head as he crumpled down. The sudden excitement seemed to hypnotize Georges. "The blood seemed to boil in my head," he expressed it. He didn't hear the command to fix bayonets at all; the first thing he knew he was running like a machine, yelling with the others, down into the ravine and up the other

side, and always with the horror of those points of gleaming steel ahead, climbing zig-zag up the slope toward — what? It seemed impossible to go against that row of sharp bayonets and live.

XVIII

So much Georges told me; more he would not tell, at first, except that he thought the Germans stopped firing at about thirty meters distance, and began to sing the *"Wacht am Rhein."*

Now I have always wanted to know the details of a typical bayonet fight — just how the issue is decided, why a Frenchman might not win here, and a German there, and so keep the victory uncertain. That, in fact, was one of the things I went to Toulouse to find out. But, to get any vivid picture of that bloody encounter was impossible.

Georges simply shook his head. "It was too horrible," he said.

At last he confessed reluctantly that when he saw the men ahead of him bayoneting the Germans, jabbing like madmen, he too gave a jump, and shut his eyes and stabbed at something he had seen in front of him, advancing with a long steel point — something that suddenly stopped singing, and squealed "like a wounded horse," he said.

"I remember only that I pulled out my bayonet, and felt a jet of warm blood strike my face," Georges went on, when I forced him. "Then, I must have almost fainted, I think; I don't know what happened till I found myself wiping my face, and something was holding me. It was the bayonet of that German's that was caught in the wing of my overcoat, somehow — and he was lying on the ground with the blood still coming out of his stomach. There were lots of our men

on the ground, but lots more of Germans. The rest of them were running; they were two hundred meters away by this time, and our men were after them, sticking them like pigs. . . . The sight of it made me sick. . . . When they came back, I was standing there, just leaning on my gun, swaying . . . and it was raining . . . I didn't know it was raining at all till then . . . but the blood was almost entirely washed off my coat. . . . Isn't that enough, m'sieur? I can't *bear* to think about it."

XIX

When the Twentieth was gathered together for roll call, it was found that there were 150 dead or wounded. Some 300 Germans were stretched upon the ground. But the enemy must be pursued. So forward, with great precautions, to a farm, their headquarters — but it was found to be empty; so

here they halted for a rest, the young men still panting with the exertion and excitement of the fight. "I tried to smoke my pipe," said Georges, "but I had to give it up."

With the artillery still hammering all about — but mostly the French batteries of "75's" now, pounding away in fours — the Twentieth stayed till night, and sent its wounded to the rear — for the stretcher bearers and ambulances were right up behind these days, with plenty to do. Here the regiment received with yells and tears the news of the victory of this five days' battle of the Marne. It was too good to be true.

The captain of Georges's company, with his arm in a sling, was a Frenchman, and now it was time for more rhetoric. He had an appreciative audience, this time. "You are men!" he announced, "you have done your duty, and France is proud of you." But France, it appeared from his talk, was not

yet free; and the moral of his discourse was that there was still considerable work to do, and he ended with the word "*Forward!*"

So, forward they went, next morning, gloriously in pursuit of the enemy, now some ten miles away. Forward, with their bayonets stained by German blood at last. Forward, all the forenoon, past villages wrecked and plundered by the barbarians; past houses gutted and outraged and burned; past trembling, fear-struck peasants offering what was left of their bread and wine. Forward all the afternoon, along the roads strewn with helmets, knapsacks, and empty wine bottles; past German camps in the open, littered with armchairs and clocks and silver plate, mattresses and broken pianos, and bottles, bottles, bottles — with sheep and cattle cut open, rotting; past dead horses everywhere, disemboweled, legs up. Forward at sunset, past wrecked automobiles,

burned to masses of curly iron; past caissons smashed by shells, and bicycles without number abandoned along the road. Forward, in the moonlight across battle fields where the dead lay in windrows in shocking confusion, mutilated abominably, dead in the long fresh trenches, filling every gallery and compartment, dead in the woods, dead on green meadows where in the cool night air wisps of trailing mist hovered near the ground and the stench was in their nostrils till they sickened and hurried on, rinsing their mouths with water!

Forward across the swath, leagues wide, of death and hate and ruin, forward, forward all that night!

XX

Three hours' rest, and then *again* forward! At noon, a farm. *Halt!* Georges

was one of the three who went forward, dodging from wall to wall, to reconnoiter. There seemed to be some secret hidden there — the roof was blown off, the windows smashed, devastation everywhere about — but it might still conceal some desperate foe. As he approached the closed door, he saw a stain on the stone step, where a little dark stream of something had dried. He pushed open the door — butchery! More than two hundred Germans who had taken refuge there had found appalling death when two howitzer shells had converted them into an incredible mass of mere bleeding flesh. No fear now need any Frenchman have of those grim Germans — save only the fear of infection. Georges flung back the door and fled.

Could he find worse horrors? Let him tell.

"On Friday, after we had been relieved, we were held in reserve in the rear, and de-

tailed to pick up the German deserters and waifs that were hiding in the woods all over the country. They were a sorry enough lot, frightened to death at first, when they threw up their hands at sight of us, but glad enough to be made prisoners and not have to work, when they found they were not going to be killed. After the wanton destruction of innocent villages we had seen — they had even destroyed the fire engines — it was pretty hard to refrain from knocking these brutes down with the butts of our rifles. We heard many stories of the atrocities they had committed in their baffled rage, but the one thing I saw was enough for me.

" We were marching through a little wood in the Department of the Marne — somewhere between Posesse and Givry, it was, I think. The company ahead suddenly began to slow up and halt — they were pointing at something, but the officers cried: 'Go on!

Go on!' Of course we were curious to know what it was they were looking at, and we halted, too. Well, our officers couldn't hold us — or they didn't try to. Some of us ran up through the trees on the right-hand side of the road to look closer.

"Eight French soldiers, m'sieur, with ropes round their necks, hanging to the limbs of the trees! I was right close to them. I saw them plainly. I know. They were riddled with bullet holes. And in among them, m'sieur, was hanging the body of a little girl. About twelve years old, I should say. *She* was shot, too. She was so pretty. . . . The officers called us back. There was no time to cut them down, even; we were hurrying along to keep in touch with the advance.

"Yes, m'sieur, we all saw it. Why, there is a man in this very hospital now who saw it, too. Last week there came a commissioner

down here on purpose to get our affidavit about it, for some report of the Government."

XXI

Georges's story is almost told, now; there remains only the end of his soldiering, which was to be eventful to the last. After following the fighting body for three days, the Twentieth Regiment was ordered into the first line.

The Germans, having now retreated to the Aisne, and eastward to the strategic positions long since prepared and mapped by German spies, had made a stand. So on toward Ville-sur-Tourbes Georges marched, the firing every moment getting hotter. They were evidently advancing against a very strong position, so that when they swung westward to the little village of Le Mesnil they began to be subjected to continuous shell-

ing and to rifle fire that grew worse and worse. But still no enemy was in sight.

Again the Twentieth had to wait for the French artillery to arrive in front of a black wood that poured out destruction. Lying in the brush, Georges wondered whether it would all end as before. As before, each man waited for his time to come; but now, seasoned, hopeful, he could joke at death.

"There's a *marmite* for you!" a corporal would sing out, as a German shell came screaming to the right; and, as the shrapnel exploded, "Look out for the prunes!" a man would yell, "they're coming your way!" Georges was taking it all coolly enough, thinking, he told me, how much those hurtling shells sounded like a subway train rolling into a station — rather more like an express traveling past without stopping. And so, when a sergeant near him yelled, "Look out — here comes our portion!" he

only laughed and ducked under the little shelter of brush and earth he had been building.

XXII

But Georges laughed too soon, he ducked just too late! There was a terrific explosion, and suddenly he felt paralyzed all over — as if by an electric shock. No pain anywhere at first; only a fearful feeling that something dire had happened to him. He was stunned; "sort of upside-down, all over," he said. Dragging himself out of the shower of dirt, dazed and frightened, he saw that his left foot was covered with blood. Then, a sudden leap of pain! He had a savage burst of anger that he should have been so treated. The pain every moment grew more excruciating. . . .

Just how he got to the rear he didn't know, but after crawling and limping somehow,

with his rifle as a crutch, he found himself at last by the wall of a house outside the village, and there he lay down to rest.

But there was to be little rest for Georges Cucurou. From that moment, for a whole week, he lived in a sort of waking nightmare. One foot bare, hopping along, hugging the walls of the village, savagely bombarded by German batteries — lying under big trees, watching his retreating regiment leaving him to almost certain capture — limping away on the arm of a stray wounded soldier in desperate haste before the " Bosches " came — that ride in a galloping ammunition wagon, bounced and jolted, bouncing into ditches, bumping over stones — and then, after a hurried first-aid dressing, that fearful journey to Ville-sur-Tourbes!

That journey — more than three miles — Georges made along the hard macadam road, crawling on his hands and knees. He

had thrown away his knapsack, he had thrown away his rifle. "But," said Georges, "there was one thing I'd have died before I'd have thrown away — and that was that Prussian helmet!" The last half mile he was carried on horseback, half fainting, behind a friendly chasseur.

That was but an incident, however — the rest of his ordeal became a confused horror of days and days in a ruined farm, with a hundred others suffering like him, without any food, except unsugared tea, with their wounds undressed — at a farm where threatening German shells dropped intermittently, keeping up the constant fear of death. Then — after endless hours, torturing hours when he thought of nothing but his ankle and his stomach, the flying automobiles of the Red Cross! Georges was wafted to a semi-heaven of beds and bandages and women's

kindly hands and faces — warm food — cleanliness; rest — at Châlons!

Georges's soldiering was over — over, that is, if you except his trip to Toulouse. To some, perhaps, a three days' railway trip in a crowded compartment with a crushed ankle might be considered an ordeal. But to Georges it was a holiday. He was going home! Home.

XXIII

At the beautiful Renaissance hospital at Toulouse on the Boulevard de Strasbourg, I found Georges Cucurou lying in the corner of a huge hall — a splendid hall it was of carvings and arches and coffer-vaulted ceiling, all hung with flags.

How small his cot looked, there in the corner of that hall, amid paintings and gild-

ings and magnificent cornices! How strange those nurses looked too — white-swathed matrons in flowing draperies, and nuns with flapping wide white headdresses gliding silently along the parqueted floor! How strange and quiet those weak, pale soldiers in the cots, and the patient soldiers sitting about in blue uniforms, and white, and red! But, most of all, how strange *he* seemed!

No, it was not Coco, any more — not Coco of the free, airy gestures, Coco of the big, innocent eyes; but some one who was content to let his straight-forward words speak for themselves. Not the boy with mobile, parted lips; but some one whose mouth closed firmly, now, when he paused, reflecting seriously before he answered. And, as he spoke of things beyond my ken, he made me, somehow, feel ashamed. Why, it seemed, now, that, having known Death so near, he knew Life itself — he was the wiser, the elder;

and I the boy, without experience save of the little arts and playthings of the world. . . .

Well, it was time to go. I took out my notebook to jot down an address, and as I did so I saw his eyes fastened upon my pencil. His face had changed.

Without a word, he reached out his hand for it. I understood — and there came up to me suddenly, a picture of the laughing boy who had pretended to shoot with such a pencil — and . . . even to give a bayonet thrust!

He looked at it curiously with a faint smile. "A-mer-i-cain Pencil Compagnie" he read with his queer French accent. Then he pressed in the end, and a little point of lead popped out. He laughed — he sighed. He handed it back. There were tears in his eyes.

"Ah, m'sieur," he said, "do you remember that day in Paris, last July?" There